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The University of Southern Mississippi

Fanfiction Communities and Plagiarism: An Academic Inquiry

by

Claudia Hicks

A Thesis  
Submitted to the Honors College of  
The University of Southern Mississippi  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirement for the Degree of  
Bachelor of Arts  
in the Department of English

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## Abstract

Fanfiction communities give would-be authors a place to practice their craft. This study focused on how fanfiction community members defined and policed plagiarism. The aim of this study was to conduct qualitative analysis of plagiarism cases in online fanfiction communities. The data sources were analyzed using Grounded Theory. Analysis found that fanfiction communities use certain protocols to police plagiarism except when it violates their highest value, popularity. This study contributes to our understanding of plagiarism in a digital age.

Key Words: Fanfiction, plagiarism, digital writing

## Dedication

Dedicated to the next generation of Honors scholars, fanfiction authors, and general Internet users: do not forget the mistakes of those who have come before you, and do not be afraid to do the research that interests you.

## Acknowledgments

Without the careful eye and never-ending patience of my advisor, Dr. Rebecca Powell, none of this would have been possible. Thank you for all of your encouragement as well as the lessons you have taught me, which will be invaluable going forward in my academic career.

Thank you to my loving and understanding parents for being understanding during these two years of research and for always having a fresh cup of coffee brewed whenever it was time to write.

I would also like to thank the moderators of TAPIR's LiveJournal community, as well as the administrators of the Dark Lord Potter, Fiction Alley, and Twilighted message boards: your efforts in preserving these accounts goes a long way in saving the shared history of fans of *Harry Potter* and *Twilight*, as well as preserving these accounts for curious Internet historians whom are interested in understanding how conflicts arise and are ultimately dealt with in the digital age.

Finally, I would like to extend a hearty thank you to the Honors College of the University of Southern Mississippi. This has been a life-changing opportunity, and I hope that the Honors College will continue to support junior scholars during this process for many years to come.

## Table of Contents

List of Tables .....	viii
List of Abbreviations .....	ix
Chapter 1: Introduction .....	1
Chapter 2: Review of the Literature.....	6
Chapter 3: Methodology .....	18
Data .....	18
Data Collection .....	20
Data Analysis .....	21
Challenges .....	22
Chapter 4: Results .....	24
Structure of an Accusation.....	24
Reactions and Disciplinary Action .....	28
Chapter 5: Discussion .....	33
Chapter 6: Conclusion.....	39
Works Cited .....	43



## List of Tables

Table 1: Breakdown of <i>Harry Potter</i> and <i>Twilight</i> Cases .....	22
---------------------------------------------------------------------------	----

## List of Abbreviations

Fic	Fanfiction
Fanfic	Fanfiction
TAPIR	The Anti-Plagiarism Investigation Reports

## Introduction

I do not think I can properly describe the pride when, after spending days writing, editing, and fact-checking the source material, I first published a short story online. Despite the story ultimately gaining very little attention, it was an incredible rush to have something to show my peers, friends and strangers alike. However, it was not an original story that I had put on display for the world, but a fanfiction. Essentially, I had written a short story about characters and worlds that already existed. This genre of writing is becoming more credible by the day. Instead of struggling through the process of writing a novel from scratch, young writers with dreams of becoming published authors are finding a new way to learn the skills they need to make this dream possible. With the commercial success of authors such as E.L. James and Cassandra Clare, the world of writing is starting to see a new trend take shape: the prolific writers of tomorrow are more and more frequently coming from a new school of education known as fanfiction.

Fanfiction is defined by scholar Thomas Bronwen as “stories produced by fans based on plot lines and characters from either a single source text or else a “canon” of works; these fan-created narratives often take the pre-existing storyworld in a new, sometimes bizarre, direction” (1). Fanfiction, often abbreviated as simply “fanfic,” is simply one facet of a much larger family of fan works—fan art, fan music—all of them produced with the same intention of engaging with an existing piece of media on some level. Fanfiction offers aspiring authors a framework for a story in recognizable characters, a setting, and drama that is easily moldable to fit a narrative of an author’s own design. Half of the work of creation is already done for them.

Because the work of creation is already done for them, fanfiction raises questions about plagiarism and copyright. Fanfiction is technically protected under United States copyright law, and falls under the category of parody. It is a safe bet for young writers, as “to date, no court case involving either printed or online fan fiction has yielded a judge’s decision establishing whether this type of work constitutes fair use or infringement” (Kosnik 10). Fanfiction remains legal, and considering that the general consensus amongst fans seems to be skewed towards discouraging monetary gain from fanfiction, aspiring authors can flit in and out of circles, using a backdrop easily accessible to them while they train themselves on the writing process. However, some fanfiction authors have made money off of their work; breakout hits such as *Fifty Shades of Grey* often start out as fanfiction and are repurposed to become an entirely new story when the idea becomes larger than the source material itself.

While the source material provides frames for writing, the fanfiction community establishes the rules of conduct and rewards. In today’s digital age, instead of waiting for weeks on end to hear back from an editor, young writers can receive feedback on their work within mere minutes of posting it on a site dedicated to archiving fanfic. These critics are typically the author’s peers, and fans of the same series being written about, allowing for a tight-knit group to form to sound future ideas off of. These circles of fans (often referred to as a “fandom”) can be an endless source of encouragement, as well as a detrimental part of the writing experience. What they learn from other fanfiction writers are values that may be inherent within a fan culture, but inapplicable to a professional or academic setting. And considering that each piece of media has its own circle of fans, sometimes with overlap but most of the time without, each sphere of fandom cultivates

its own set of values towards discussion, attitudes, and most importantly, plagiarism. Because these fandoms are digital and full of voluntary writers, studying how users negotiate plagiarism can help us understand evolving definitions of plagiarism in the digital age.

Within fanfiction communities, plagiarism is regulated from within, although the definition of plagiarism is hotly contested. The rules for self-plagiarism, referencing and repurposing older published works, and crossovers can vary from fan community to fan community. These shifting definitions are interesting because they show us how people view and police plagiarism when it is not mandated that they do so. This can shed light on academic and professional practices surrounding plagiarism. In addition, it speaks volumes as to how plagiarism is defined in a digital age: technology has had a lasting impact on every part of life, the Internet more so than anything else. Because it is now easier than ever to trace anything back to its source—even a fic written years after an author has become a professional writer—it becomes apparent that there is really no way to truly erase past actions. A fanfiction writer can make mistakes in their youth and potentially be called into question as an adult when fans discover their past. And, with the ease of access to every document imaginable, it's now easier than ever to plagiarize—and to find plagiarists.

Examining how plagiarism is regulated and negotiated in fanfiction communities speaks to both the legitimacy of fanfiction as a way to engage with the writing process as well as the power of fandoms in encouraging young authors to pursue a career in writing. It also serves as a much-needed examination of the way plagiarism is defined and regulated within a digital age. While fanfiction authors could be progressive in their

approaches to plagiarism, without study we will not understand how plagiarism is defined and understood in these communities.

Although research exists on how fans regulate the actions of one another—Leora Hadas’ “The Web Planet: How the Changing Internet Divided *Doctor Who* Fan Fiction Writers” examines how a disagreement on moderation was framed and contained within the *Doctor Who* fandom, how the arguments were formulated, and how it was resolved—studies on definitions and the policing of plagiarism in fanfiction communities is relatively scant. Thus, I turn to firsthand accounts of disagreements between fans regarding plagiarism, and especially towards accusations of plagiarism as they regard published authors that started in fanfiction. These accounts are contained within fanfiction communities and exist as digital archives.

In my research, I examine several different fan communities to analyze and define their rules of plagiarism and attempt to connect these rules to criticism of authors that have their roots in fanfiction. Specifically, I gathered and analyzed reports of plagiarism in two fanfiction communities, the *Harry Potter* and *Twilight* fandoms. I also examined criticism of *The Mortal Instruments* author Cassandra Clare’s fanfiction roots by a fan under the pseudonym “Avocado” and her firsthand account of what she calls the “Cassandra Clare Debacle,” the evidence for her argument compiled for easy access in an essay under the same name. I also plan to examine similar accusations made to *Fifty Shades of Grey* author E.L. James. Finally, I examined anti-plagiarism communities catered to fanfiction authors across fan communities (that is, plagiarism communities that accept inquiries from more than one circle of fan) as well as communities centered on plagiarism within the *Harry Potter* and *Twilight* fanfiction communities. By examining

firsthand accounts, I am able to go straight to the source of any conflict arising between fans, and by examining plagiarism communities that cater both to general and specific crowds, I am able to find overlap in rules regarding plagiarism, as well as differences.

With my research, I identify what rules or definitions are being contested in regards to plagiarism, why they are being contested, how they vary between fandoms, and what we can take away as lessons for future writers, as well as what it says about plagiarism in a digital age.

## Literature Review

The root of the questions posed is understanding how plagiarism is defined within specific communities, and if it differs from the academic and legal definitions. A simple definition of plagiarism offered by legal communities include “The act of appropriating the literary composition of another author, or excerpts, ideas, or passages therefrom, and passing the material off as one's own creation” (“Plagiarism.”). In theory, it is a relatively simple concept to explain and uncover—especially given the technological advances towards detecting it—but rarely is it as open and shut as the definition would make one believe. The difficulty in defining and asserting whether or not plagiarism has taken place and its repercussions lies in the way different institutions define it. Academia and the literary world define it and, by extension, treat it differently than the legal system does; different institutions within academia may also have differing opinions in how they define and treat plagiarism. Similarly, fanfiction communities haggle over their own definitions and sanctions.

In the literary sphere, plagiarism originates from Romantic writers of the late eighteenth century, followers of individualism whom believed that the only acceptable use of borrowed works was to transform the source material in some way that redefined the original understanding of the work and thereby create something new (Stearns 517). Although the Romantic writers are the origins of this definition of plagiarism, modern understandings of plagiarism within literary circles has evolved, with an understanding that all things are nearly derivative in some way. This change was part of a more general shift due to postmodernism and what Barthes termed “the death of the author” (5-6). Stearns uses the example of F. Scott Fitzgerald famously reusing happenings in his life



for book plots, and as the practice of reinventing plots for a modern audience (such as *West Side Story* being a retelling of *Romeo and Juliet*) fell into favor (Stearns 517-518), the literati has slowly narrowed its definition of plagiarism to mean an intentional copying of words. In academia, as long as credit is given where it is due, it is understood that research is necessary when formulating something new, be it a new theory or a reworking of an old one with new information. As Stearns describes it,

In forms of writing in which citation to supporting authorities is customary, the scholarly plagiarist's offense consists less in omitting to transform the borrow material than in omitting to identify its source (518).

Academic plagiarism is commonly associated with the copying of papers by students passing off work as their own, although it is not limited solely to the actions of students in its scope. It also does not take into account that definitions of plagiarism are largely based in individualism, and that international students may not share the same notions of plagiarism as their peers; Kathryn Valentine's "Plagiarism as Literary Practice: Recognizing and Rethinking Ethical Binaries" recounts the experience of a Chinese graduate student named Lin whom suffered several penalties upon the discovery of plagiarism in a final course paper, although the plagiarism itself had only occurred because of a misunderstanding in the assignment and the differences in citation practices between China and the United States. Despite the root of the problem being a simple misunderstanding and error in punctuation (he had not added quotation marks to direct quotes, but had extensive footnotes detailing the source of each quote) he was failed from the course, had a permanent warning issued upon his record, and was required to serve in the graduate program's writing center in order to learn American citation practices (98-100). Lin's case is, although perhaps a cruel illustration of the severity of academic

plagiarism, an important case nonetheless, as it details that definitions of plagiarism differ across communities and hold severe consequences.

While students are the most common example of the perpetrators of plagiarism, academics and professionals are not exempt from it, either. Professors often have a different code of conduct to hold themselves to, and differing practices that may seem unusual at best and even a gross double standard at worst when it comes to plagiarism.

It should be pointed out that although current concerns focus on student plagiarism, examples of teacher and administrative plagiarism are commonplace. In 1980, it was discovered that the plagiarism section in the student assistant's handbook of the University of Oregon was copied verbatim from the Stanford University handbook (New York Times, 1980). An article in Syllabus on Internet plagiarism was found to contain four sentences nearly identical to those in an article that had appeared in the Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration (Carnevale, 2003). What is more disturbing and commonplace is the use by professors of their graduate students' work without appropriate recognition and citation (Bartlett & Smallwood, 2004). (qtd. in Evering and Moorman, 36)

Although these practices may seem ironic when considering how harshly plagiarism is typically punished within a university setting, it shows the often contradictory nature of plagiarism, where practices that a student would be brought to task for are, while reported and perhaps discouraged, not the end all to a career and in some cases, even simply another part of the job for a professor.

The definition of plagiarism in the American legal system intersects with the definitions of intellectual property and copyright law. The legal precedent for the definition of plagiarism comes from *Twentieth Century-Fox Film Corporation v. Dieckhaus* in 1946, where the similarities between an unpublished book manuscript and a movie script were questioned but eventually the decision was made that "No ordinary observer would receive any impression that the film is a picturization of plaintiff's book"

and that “plagiarism is copying” (v. Dieckhaus). Therefore, the judicial system treats plagiarism as synonymous to copying, and as Stearns reports “cases of literary plagiarism are most often handled as cases of copyright infringement,” copyright infringement in this instance simply meaning copying something without any permission granted to the perpetrator (521). Stearns goes on to explain that plagiarism in legal terms is also most commonly found when dealing with intellectual property-law, “a specialty that in itself divided by subject matter into discrete subspecies: copyright, patent, trademark, trade secrets, and unfair competition” (522). Where intellectual property-law and plagiarism meet is perhaps the most unclear intersection of them all, as intellectual property itself is a blanket term for “the products of human intelligence and creation” (“Intellectual Property.”), a definition that can be molded as lawyers see fit. Intellectual property cases are not always cases of plagiarism, but cases of plagiarism are rarely brought up outside of it, considering (as stated previously) it is mostly used as a replacement for “copying.” The law has narrowed its definition of plagiarism to one term, and this term is widely used to mean one specific thing in a variety of different cases.

All three of these concepts of plagiarism intersect in haphazard ways, but all result in punishment in some form or another, although academia is perhaps the most aggressive in regards to how it handles plagiarism. Universities have it hardwired into their code of conduct that plagiarism is one of the worst offenses a student can commit. In the age of the Internet, information can be found and copied within minutes, and with it comes an increased fear that the numbers of cheaters are on the rise. In one report, while 10 percent of undergraduates admitted to plagiarizing from the Internet in 1999, it took only two years for the number of cases to rise to 40 percent (Sisti 216-17). This

mentality can be damning, however: in Sean Zwagerman's "The Scarlet P: Plagiarism, Panopticism, and the Rhetoric of Academic Integrity" points out that it is perfectly reasonable to assume that the increased awareness caused by an increased interest in uncovering plagiarism and get in ahead against modern technology has led to more accounts of cheating and plagiarism being uncovered (678). Because more cheaters are being uncovered simply because of advances in technology, he argues that it is unfair to assume that simply because students can cheat, they inevitably will. While it is important to understand how much of a problem cheating truly is, it is also important to understand the nuances behind these cases, especially in regards to students, as there can be other variables going into the act.

Fanfiction, then, falls at an even stranger intersection between the Romantic concept of taking someone else's work and copyright infringement, although anyone with an understanding of plagiarism outside of legal terms should be hesitant to call fanfiction in general synonymous with it, as the concept as a whole only works under the assumption that the reader is familiar with the source material. In order to discuss fanfiction and its place in literary tradition, we first need to understand where fanfiction sits in relation to the much larger Internet community, as well as the history behind the phenomenon.

Fanfiction (often abbreviated as "fanfic" or "fic") falls under the much larger category known as fanworks. For the purpose of this paper, the term *fanwork* or *fanworks* (a term with its origins in Internet communities) will be used to describe any body of work based off of an already existing piece of media not created by the original owner of the property, and without the intention of making a profit. Typically, it is written for

much the same reasons as other fanworks are created: to interpret, redefine, or otherwise pay tribute to a beloved work of fiction. It is important to note that fanfiction can be written (and often is written) for several different types of media, and not just books or a body of text. But, for the purpose of this study I am looking solely at fanfiction written about novels. The most detailed accounts of plagiarism within fanfiction communities come from within groups centered on young adult novels, and so it makes sense to narrow the scope of my research to where these patterns have been established.

It is difficult to say when exactly fanfiction gained traction as a method of fans to communicate, celebrate, and often times re-tell their favorite stories; traditional folklore built upon the additions of several authors over centuries, recreating their favorite legends and adding new ones into the canon until the true definition of the word was muddled beyond all recognition. Again, for the scope of this paper, I am looking specifically at fanfiction written about books: J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* and Stephanie Meyer's *Twilight* are two series of books published within the last twenty years and written for an adolescent audience. Both series reached pop culture significance, and because their intended audience grew up with access to the Internet, large groups of fans were able to gather immediately online (as opposed to growing elsewhere and then moving to online forums). It is more practical to archive the evolution of thoughts and ideas within these communities as opposed to tracking the roots of much older series.

Although fanworks are not a product of the Internet—fan magazines for the popular television show *Star Trek* circulated heavily during its original run in the 1960s—the works that I will look at are specifically from fan communities (or *fandoms*, slang for a group of dedicated fans) that have been built from the ground-up within the

last twenty years and are heavily intertwined in Internet culture. This is, effectively, a double-edged sword: with accessibility comes conflicting definitions, and much older fandoms have had growing pains as younger generations come into their circles. These tensions are something important to keep in mind when discussing one particular fandom as a whole, and are often the result of an age imbalance or a split between older and younger fans.

Where is fanfiction archived, and where do fans gather to circulate their works? Within the numerous facets of the World Wide Web, several dedicated sites exist to cater to fans and their needs. Although more common in the earlier years of the Internet, fandom-specific archives meant to host fanfiction for a particular series still exist. Typically, sites such as Xing Li's Fanfiction.net and the Organization for Transformative Works' (abbreviated as "OTW") Archive of Our Own are used to publish fanfiction with the intention of categorizing it by fandom or body of media and not limiting the potential member's scope. Li and the OTW have maintained the most popular sites for archiving fanfiction within the past two decades, but although they will be invaluable resources, they will not be the only places I will look to find information. Fandom-specific archives typically give a better sample of what a particular fan community's beliefs are due to being more specialized in content.

Is fanfiction legal? Although most amateur writers are not in the business of writing their stories for financial gain, fanfiction (as well as other fanworks) still uses the intellectual property of someone else. Publication happens, although on an amateur level with only the intent of sharing with other fans or fixing a particularly murky narrative in mind. In Rebecca Black, Lauren Lewis, and Bill Tomlinson's 2009 article, "Let Everyone

Play: An Educational Perspective on Why Fan Fiction Is, or Should Be, Legal”, they argue that fanfiction ultimately falls under the legally protected category of parody. Because no legal precedent has been set nor has any author taken action against fans, as long as the work in question can be proven to have some sort of “transformative quality” for the original piece of literature, the fanfiction can safely enjoy protection under United States copyright law (Lewis and Tomlinson 4-5).

Having established a clear definition of fanfiction, as well as where it is commonly circulated and how it sits in relation to a larger cultural scale, it is important to note how exactly fanfiction and fanfiction authors engage with professional authors, and the similarities within. J. R. R. Tolkien, the author behind the fantasy epic series *The Lord of the Rings*, is highly documented as being derivative of medieval texts. This in itself can be broadly defined as a work of fanfiction within itself. Megan B. Abrahamson’s “J.R.R Tolkien, Fanfiction, And ‘The Freedom of the Reader’” discusses *The Lord of the Rings* within the terms of fanfiction. According to Abrahamson, his search for inspiration for his famous books—in his youth, in fact, he wrote a tale inspired by the Finnish tale *The Kalevala*, that would ultimately inspire several aspects of his later works—closely mirrors the pattern that fanfiction authors follow in order to dissect canon for consumption and, later, repurposing within the grounds of their own fanfiction (Abrahamson 10-12).

Although J. R. R. Tolkien’s history with fans involves generally looking down upon fanfiction (more specifically, works that disregard already-established canon facts), it is impossible to say that this cycle of inspiration is unique to fanfiction writers consuming published works. Inherently, it is the same cycle under a brand new name.

Tolkien represents a minority of authors that discourage fanfiction within their works, although naysayers still exist. Generally, authors are vocal when they are morally opposed to fanfiction: Anne Rice, in particular, is vehemently against fanfiction of her characters, going so far as to make statements on her official website about it (Rice, On “Fan Fiction” 5). Fanfiction.net hosts a list of authors who have specifically requested not to have fanfiction written about their works and, in the same vein, refuses to allow works based on the works of those authors be published onto the site. Despite these vocal few, author reception towards fanfiction runs the gamut from startlingly neutral to warm and complacent. This overwhelming majority is highly encouraging for fanfiction authors with aspirations towards becoming a professional writer.

Having established a solid connection between fanfiction authors, professional writers, and how similar the writing processes may be, it is clear that fanfiction may be a legitimate mode of examining what a story means and how it operates. But what of how fandoms interact with one another? How exactly are their definitions of plagiarism formed, whether fans be few and far between or as numerous as the pages of well-worn novels, and how influential are these communities towards a fanfiction author’s success?

Kelly Chandler-Olcott and Donna Maher’s essay “Adolescents’ Anime-Inspired ‘Fanfictions’: An Exploration Of Multiliteracies,” describes in detail the two authors’ experiences with two seventh-grade students as they went through the process of writing and sharing their fanfiction in an attempt to classify these practices as falling within multiliteracy, a school of literary thought that puts emphasis on peoples’ interaction with texts changing due to new technology and what it means for contemporary literary theory. Although successful, Chandler-Olcott and Maher also detailed the benefits the



two students received from their endeavors: “First, the girls reported multiple purposes for composing their fanfictions. Writing was seen as a way to have fun, exercise one’s imagination, and avoid boredom. Rhiannon [one of the girls] also characterized it as “stress relief” (560). What they were less likely to say explicitly, but what seemed clear to us, was that fanfiction writing also helped to develop and solidify relationships with various friends, online or otherwise” (Chandler-Olcott and Maher 3).

Chandler-Olcott and Maher document the positive feedback received from two individuals working on their stories together. Ideally, fanfiction communities work the same way, but on a grander scale: authors post their stories, and their peers encourage and critique in order to build skills unique to the writing process. Unfortunately, as previously mentioned, within communities conflict arises, whether over plagiarism or interpretation of the source material. But, in order for fans to continuously want to produce material, it seems to reason that the majority of fans act civil and are encouraging of their own, if only to keep their circles alive.

In Jun Liu’s book *Asian Students’ Classroom Communication Patterns in U.S. Universities: An Emic Perspective*, Liu also details the additional benefits of a fanfiction community to English as a Second Language, or ESL, students of Asian descent. She observed that engaging with media in these communities provided positive feedback and was overall much more beneficial for ESL students learning English than a classroom setting (Liu 219-230). Interactions between fans are not always pleasant, but are typically overwhelmingly positive, and provide a supportive starting point for young writers, making the allure of fanfiction that much stronger.

With all that said, what is there to say on the interaction between fans as it involves plagiarism? Unfortunately, very few academic studies exist specifically relate to plagiarism as it involves fanfiction. Most of the content produced is circulated through archives like Fanfiction.net or by fandom-specific community blogs. Although there is little academic backing, the resources are nearly limitless as far as finding examples, and these examples are hardly removed from the professional writing community as a whole. Arguably one of the most heavily documented cases of plagiarism within a fandom even involves a published author, Cassandra Clare.

In 2006, JournalFen user Avocado posted a lengthy exposé, detailing the accusations of plagiarism against fanfiction author Judith Rumelt, better known by her pseudonym Cassandra Clare, in what is known as “The Cassandra Clare Debacle.” Cassandra Clare, author of the bestselling book series *The Mortal Instruments*, had humble beginnings as a fanfiction writer for J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series. During Clare’s time in the fandom, she published fanfiction about the antagonist character Draco Malfoy in a series of works titled the “Draco” Trilogy that were highly controversial due to the fact that large portions of the text were ripped from much older fantasy novels without proper credit or indication that they were not of her own creation. This account stands as one of the most comprehensive examples of plagiarism within a fanfiction community, and is helpful for framing how one can observe rules being formed and contested in regards to citing sources and proper credit (“The Cassandra Clare Plagiarism Debacle.”). Examining these firsthand accounts is imperative to understanding the fan’s perspective of plagiarism. And, taking into account fanfiction’s place in literary tradition,

it is a practice that cannot be ignored, especially when brought to the public eye via works like *Fifty Shades of Grey*.

As we have established, there are numerous reasons why a young author might be attracted to writing fanfiction. And, indeed, there are always incentives to plagiarize when something such as grades or academic merit are on the line. But what happens when those incentives disappear, and suddenly the young authors interested in connecting with fans through their own words are found to be using the words of someone else? There is a less clear indication of what there might be to gain from plagiarizing fanfiction when interactions within a fan community are not compulsory like in educational settings, do not result in monetary compensation, and have a very minute chance to attract a potential employer, especially when fanfiction is only one of many ways to engage within a fandom. How do fanfiction communities negotiate and deal with plagiarism when the benefits are so little? The answers lead to a larger discussion on how plagiarism is negotiated within digital communities, and, more importantly, what can we learn about the motivations behind plagiarism.

## Methodology

I chose to approach my research using a method known as Grounded Theory, the basics of which are to begin with open-ended questions instead of a hypothesis, and where data was “produced and analyzed simultaneously through an inductive process designed to produce categories, themes, and substantive theory related to a particular phenomenon” (qtd. in Blase 2). This theory allows for a more qualitative set of data to be used, which is more useful for the unconventional data set at my disposal. The questions I sought to find answers for were simple: how is plagiarism being defined within these fanfiction communities? Do these fanfiction communities enforce their rules in ways similar to any institutions outside of the Internet? And, finally, do these ideals come into conflict with institutions outside of the fanfiction communities that enforce them?

### Data

To gather my data, I used the archives of fandoms anti-plagiarism communities, message boards, and personal blogs. Below, I describe why I use these sources of data and give their history and background. These sources of data worked as digital case studies that allowed me to build portraits of plagiarism cases.

One source of data was built by the fanfiction author and community member “Avocado.” In the opening lines of “The Cassandra Clare Debacle”, author “Avocado” agrees with the sentiment by a fellow member of the Harry Potter community that the fandom tolerates and even supports the big names in their community despite proof of plagiarism; this sets the tone for the long collection of essays and evidence outlining Cassandra Clare’s actions, the accusations of plagiarism that were thrown her way, and the angry responses directed towards the disciplinary actions taken. Although this

collection of evidence was compiled and published in 2006, the actions that led to the original conflict began as early as 2001. The span of six years in which this essay encases is a permanent mark on the history of fanfiction in the *Harry Potter* community, and although a majority of the plagiarism claims examined for this paper happen after this incident, it continues to inform the way plagiarism is understood by the community.

As “The Cassandra Clare Debacle” is such an extensive look at plagiarism within fandoms, it seemed imperative to use it as a jumping off point when selecting what fandoms I should take a closer look at. After careful consideration, I looked extensively at the fanfiction communities of J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series and Stephanie Meyer’s *Twilight* saga. As previously mentioned, these books are fantasy novels published within the last two decades, and so their communities have grown solely from the Internet, with the original fandom skewed heavily towards adolescents. Both series have also had their final volumes published as of writing this paper, and so the chance of a change to canon text is minimal; *Harry Potter*’s final book (*Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*) was published on July 21, 2007, and *Twilight*’s final book (*Breaking Dawn*) was published on August 2, 2008. They are also roughly the same in terms of cultural impact and overall fandom size, and most importantly, have produced two published authors whom had roots to the communities in Cassandra Clare and E.L. James, respectively. In order to understand how plagiarism is defined and moderated within these communities, it was important to examine communities that had already produced professional authors.

The *Harry Potter* and *Twilight* sections in both of the most popular fanfiction archives, Fanfiction.net and the Organization for Transformative Works’ Archive of Our

Own, are saturated with stories; just on Fanfiction.net alone, nearly *one million* stories have been published based upon these young adult novels. It made sense to start my search for documentation on plagiarism where the most people gather in order to isolate some of the rules of plagiarism that form within fan communities. Beginning here led me even deeper into the world of fanfiction, enabling me to find where the host site keeps records of plagiarists. The majority of my data eventually came from where I was eventually led: websites and forums dedicated to these books and anti-plagiarism communities on the blogging sites Livejournal.com and Dreamwidth.org. The most frequent source for finding accusations of plagiarism was Fanfiction.net's own group dedicated to sifting through plagiarism accusations, The Anti-Plagiarism Investigation Reports (TAPIR) and their archive blog on the website LiveJournal. TAPIR is not tied to any one fandom, and therefore can be used to determine broad rules within fanfictions communities. In addition, I combed through fandom-specific message boards for the *Harry Potter* and *Twilight* book series, as they directly influenced the opinions of fans of Cassandra Clare and E.L. James. This was to separate what rules carry from fandom to fandom and what individual communities hold sacred.

Fanfiction communities themselves exist on several websites. This is evident in my data sources that span several websites but include the same community members. Identifying where these fans are gathering to discuss plagiarism was part of the challenge of conducting this study.

### Data Collection

Data collection from these archives took place between August 1<sup>st</sup>, 2015 and December 31<sup>st</sup>, 2015, with additional evidence slowly being added until February 2016.

Each individual case was read and followed through the various websites: when evidence that plagiarism had occurred was presented, I screenshotted its occurrence and followed the digital trail. The digital trail included usernames, comments in message boards, and associated links. As my sole source for documentation was the Internet, special consideration was taken to properly preserve my evidence in the event of system failure or deletion in the original source, most often a website. Each individual artifact, a screenshot, after having been read through, was first put into an entirely new word document and dated, with a link back to the original source page. In addition, screenshots were also taken of each page and backed up in case the original website was unavailable. At the end of data collection, I was able to find 104 individual cases of plagiarism reported in the Harry Potter community and 37 individual cases of plagiarism in the Twilight community.

### Data Analysis

In accordance to Grounded Theory, the cases were then analyzed as an entire body of evidence instead of individual cases and categorized into groups based on trends observed. To follow the theory further, the categories that I ultimately categorized my findings in were based upon common factors in all of these cases. Following grounded theory was helpful to my methods when choosing these categories, as to find my best answers I needed to let the data speak for itself and examine the trends as they appear, instead of starting with categories and struggling to mold the data to those categories. While some of these categories were broad, several are specific categories, focused on smaller trends outside of what was most obvious. At the end of my analysis, there were eight categories that emerged as the most important trends in plagiarism within fanfiction

communities or that were most pertinent to my research. These categories included whether or not any apology was received on the part of the accused, whether or not a plagiarized piece of writing was stolen from another fanfiction or from another piece of media, who filed the original complaint (“self-reporting” being the original fanfiction author reported the accusation, as opposed to someone else reporting), and even whether or not the fanfic in question was deemed “not safe for work” and contained subjects of an intense sexual or violent nature. How these cases break down can be seen in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Breakdown of *Harry Potter* and *Twilight* cases.

	Apology Received	Cross-Fandom Plagiarism	Not Safe for Work Fiction	Others Reporting	Self-Reporting	Stolen from Other Fanfiction	Stolen from Published Media	Repeat Offenders
Harry Potter	9	24	40	87	21	97	13	42
Twilight	6	10	7	25	13	37	6	10

### Challenges

While the cases can be quantified into hard numbers, all of these instances of plagiarism are better suited to be analyzed as they are instead of trying to use them to prove a hypothesis. All of the accounts are being reported by people, and at the end of the day, no matter how thorough some of these artifacts are at detailing instances of plagiarism, they are still prone to human error. These cases are subjective, and a quantitative approach does not easily account for the types of trends that occur and that should be documented in order to find answers to the questions that I started with. In



addition, these documents are snapshots of time gone by. Although the Internet lends itself to the archiving of writings and events very well, ultimately the data I worked with was found in places where it is all too easy to restrict access to or delete entirely. In addition, the categories that I selected are constructive to examining how plagiarism is defined and regulated within these fanfiction communities. They take into account who is reporting plagiarism (and by extension, who is enforcing the definition of plagiarism) as well as factors surrounding the accusation and the past actions of the plagiarist. Noting these trends informs the climate of the fandom and their own perceptions of plagiarism.

Preservation of these moments is important, not only to document trends in fandom and how they relate back to Internet plagiarism, but also to keep tabs on how fandoms change over time. Saving these artifacts is saving controversies that ultimately lent themselves to shaping how communities regulate themselves; as they grow and change, it is always important to note where they have been in order to learn from history gone by.

## Results

Ultimately, I ended up with 104 reports of plagiarism within the *Harry Potter* community and 37 reports of plagiarism within the *Twilight* community. From the beginning, it was apparent that there are two major factors in deciding what stories are considered plagiarism within these communities, and that their differences would lie in how the individual fandoms accounted for these factors. The first deals with the use of the source material, as well as use of ideas that were not originally the author's, whether it be using direct quotations or entire concepts. The second was where these direct quotes or ideas originally came from, and whether or not a plagiarist was taking things from published media or another fanfiction. Who reported the plagiarism is also an important factor in how the punishment was delivered, and, although minor, the rating of the story (whether or not it was considered appropriate for all audiences or appropriate for adults) was something examined in order to have a better understanding of the structure of the fandom from which E.L. James originated from. The prevailing trends were that, overwhelmingly, fanfiction was plagiarized from other fanfiction, apologies are never given, and although stories considered mature are not the most common, there are still a substantial amount of fanfics plagiarized that are for mature audiences. In what follows, I outline how accusations are made, how members respond to and discipline plagiarism.

### Structure of an Accusation

Across 104 reports of plagiarism in the *Harry Potter* fandom and 37 reports in the *Twilight* fandom, one of the most prevalent trends is that “self-reporting”—that is to say, the original author of either a fanfiction or another piece of media recognizing that their work is being plagiarized and calling attention to it—is in the overwhelming majority of

reports. Of the cases viewed, most of the people submitting these reports and making posts claiming that they have uncovered plagiarism within their community are concerned fans.

What gets cited as plagiarism tends to fall in to one of two categories: directly copying another story, sometimes with changes to character names or wording in order to cover the act, or stealing a large amount of the concepts or ideas of a fic. While the former is much more common than the latter, the latter is still called out from time to time. As an example, a member of the of the Dark Lord Potter forums (a message board dedicated to the *Harry Potter* series) under the username Giovanni points out a curious example of plagiarism between a fic named “Harry Potter and Gabrielle Delacour” and a different fic named “Hope” by author Jeconais in their report:

And what I found was a disclaimer at the top of the page, explaining how the authors original version was just some blatant plagiarism [sic] off of Jeconais' story "Hope". 'Okay' I thought, 'so he accidentally uploaded the wrong one at first.' But then I read his story... He didn't just plagiarize [sic] Jeconais' work; he took almost the entire plot line (“You Have to Read this to Believe it.”).

Despite the admission of guilt, this fanfic was still uploaded to Fanfiction.net. It has since been deleted, but the comments section following this forum post continue to point out similarities between the two stories, one commenter named bornagainpenguin even pointing out that the perpetrator had stolen another fanfiction “word for word”, claiming that someone could “just copy a section into google with quotes and see which story he stole (“Re: You Have to Read this to Believe it.”). Not only does this particular instance showcase a repeat offender (an author who has plagiarized multiple fanfics or continues to plagiarize despite being caught) but it shows that the fans at large are vigilant and typically comb through every story of an author’s once an accusation sticks.

An overwhelming majority of the fanfiction plagiarized within these reports are considered “not safe for work” by the community, a common saying meaning that the story contains material that is inappropriate to view in the workplace or in the public sphere. These stories are either marked as having an “M” rating on Fanfiction.net, which adopts its system from Fictionratings.com and cites the “M” rating as being “suitable for teens, 13 years or older, with some violence, minor coarse language, and minor suggestive adult themes”, considered not appropriate for a young audience by the nature of the website they are published on, such as the fanfiction from the reports hosted on sites like adultfanfiction.net, or otherwise marked as having mature themes present in the story and considered not appropriate for a younger audience (*Guidelines* Fanfiction.net). Of the cases reviewed in the *Harry Potter* community, 39 of the 104 stories were either given an “M” rating or otherwise considered not appropriate for younger audiences; 6 of the 37 cases within the *Twilight* community fell under the same standards. The number of fics considered “not safe for work” were isolated specifically because author E.L. James reached financial success from writing erotica. Tracking the movements of fanfiction marked as for mature audiences increases the understanding of the community from which she got her start.

Among the pieces of published media that were plagiarized and turned into fanfiction for *Harry Potter* or *Twilight*, there does not seem to be a common trend in genre or theme. All of the works plagiarized were printed media (either books or poetry) but that is where the similarities end. Of the sources, there were a few instances of copying text from other fantasy novels and simply changing the names, one instance of an uncredited poem being passed off as an original work for a *Twilight*-themed poetry

contest, once instance of a story being lifted from “an entry in the HCI publishing book ‘Chicken Soup for the Father & Son Soul’ (“Second and Third Verse...” )”, and, in one memorable instance, a fanfiction author had taken to posting entire sections from the *Harry Potter* novels to post on AdultFanFiction.net.

A universal trend between both of the communities is the importance placed upon the accusations. Most questions of whether or not something constituted as plagiarism were met with responses, such as this example from a TAPIR case against a user named KiaraLivie:

KiaraLivie will be added to the list of indefinite plagiarists, since it has been established that she has no intent of stopping her plagiarism. Reporting and exposure efforts on her case will continue, but caution is advised in any dealings with her” (“The Case Against KiaraLivie.”).

This response is typically what is given every time plagiarism was found to have occurred. The offender was added to a list for at least one year. On message boards, an accused plagiarist found to be guilty was banned. Help was offered if it was requested every time without fail, and advice dispensed through comment threads. Due to the nature of the websites visited for this information, moderator action was also viewable, and in most cases, taken. Fanfiction.net’s plagiarism watchdog group, TAPIR, has clear outlines for the punishment of people found plagiarizing in their steps outlining the process of moderator action:

Take action against the plagiarist by: adding the plagiarists various pseudonyms to the *List of "Convicted" Plagiarists* for one year. This time can be reduced or extended, as regards the behaviour of the plagiarist. For example, a new report of plagiarism after having been through the process previously... Contacting archives where the plagiarized work is hosted (“Profile- stop\_plagiarism.”).

This lack of dismissal is consistent with the notion that plagiarism is one of the worst marks a fan can get during their time in a community, and because this list of known plagiarists is created in conjunction with the biggest fanfiction hosting site and encompasses such a wide variety of communities, being found guilty of plagiarism is a crime that has serious repercussions within all fanfiction communities.

Despite such heavy emphasis on the permanent effects of plagiarizing within these communities, there is still a collection of people whom are repeat offenders in TAPIR's ranks, having amassed large and lengthy reports of their plagiarism escapades; in fact, in several of the cases viewed, some repeat offenders go to astronomical lengths to dip their hands into as many communities as possible with their plagiarism efforts. In one 2013 report, TAPIR moderator roguemudblood filed a report on the community's LiveJournal hub, recounting the tale of an author by the name of Broken Promises 22 and the 133 cases of plagiarism uncovered within the 191 stories posted on their Fanfiction.net account ("Broken Promises 22, 133 instances of plagiarism."). Despite moderator action and being blacklisted on a rather damning list, repeat offenders are a rather common trend amongst both the Harry Potter and Twilight fanfiction communities; forty-two of the *Harry Potter* and ten of the *Twilight* cases involve someone whom either plagiarized again after being warned once or who upon investigation for one instance of plagiarism is discovered to have several more instances of taking credit for someone else's work.

#### Reactions and Disciplinary Action

One of the most interesting phenomenon surrounding the way each of the communities report plagiarism is the reactions of those that have been accused of the act

itself. Despite its status as being absolutely damning to participation in a community, more often than not claims that end up being true are met with hostility instead of any form of apology. In one such case, a writer by the name of Ronin S. Oath's was discovered to have plagiarized all of their works from various other fanfics. When prompted, Ronin S. Oath deleted their stories and issued a response, claiming that they "admit that it is true and all of the copied works have been removed" as well as explaining that they had also sent similar apologies to the authors whom they had plagiarized ("Case of Ronin S. Oath."). In fact, any sort of apology at all appears to be a rare phenomenon: of the 104 *Harry Potter* cases reviewed, only nine of the plagiarists issued any sort of apology, and of the 37 *Twilight* cases, only six apologies were found. The responses to such accusation are numerous, but typically fall into three distinct categories: hostile, apologetic, or simply unaware that the act of plagiarism had been committed in the first place. The final response is the most interesting for the purposes of the original investigation, as this shows a gap of knowledge in the exact definition of plagiarism as it is policed within these fanfiction communities.

At the end of every investigation, regardless of the process, punishment was enacted, and the community's stance regarding plagiarism was strictly reinforced, typically with words from a moderator or administrator of either the fanfiction sites or the blogging platforms and forums where the accusation was brought to light. As stated previously, TAPIR's stance is to automatically place anyone in violation of Fanfiction.net's community guideless on a blacklist of plagiarists. It is noted down in the post-investigation reports on TAPIR's blog "Stop-Plagiarism" when the offending stories are removed from the sites where they are hosted. Even in platforms where the focus is

not on identifying and stopping plagiarism, a stance is taken every time action is required: to quote Administrator psymom of the Twilighted community boards, “Plagiarism will not be tolerated on this site—not only is it illegal and unethical, it is also an insult to all of the people who actually pour their hearts into writing original work, even if we are borrowing the characters and the universe from SM (“Plagiarism.”)”. In all of these reports, there seems to be a reaffirmation that follows, a justification of the beliefs of the community and that there are standards by which the community should hold themselves to. The average member of the community echoes those beliefs, too: within nearly all of these cases lies some sort of comment made about the nature of the plagiarist or the act itself by a passerby, usually to question whether or not the act itself was worth the ire of the community or to insult the character of the plagiarist. Two of the comments from an overview post of several different cases sums up the majority of comments quite succinctly: “Have to give the lying little thief credit for stealing from a pro! Hope she gets slapped down but hard” (amorettea, January 15<sup>th</sup> 2011) and, directly below it, “I really don’t understand the satisfaction these people get from plagiarizing” (staringiscaring, January 16<sup>th</sup> 2011).

Both the *Harry Potter* and *Twilight* fanfiction communities appear to be a fan of a zero-tolerance policy towards plagiarism, appear to have dedicated fans willing to sniff out and call attention to plagiarists, and a willingness to follow the rules that their leaders have laid down—at least, on a small scale. The most interesting instances of fandom activity involving plagiarism involve the very authors that, for better or worse, exemplify critical and financial success in the professional sphere from their communities. When faced with popular fanfiction authors drawing fire from plagiarism accusations, the *Harry*



*Potter* and *Twilight* fanfiction communities came to a similar conclusion about their respective authors.

Communities negotiate how plagiarism is handled depending on who is being accused and how the fandom at large feels about the plagiarist in question. While the *Twilight* community and the *Harry Potter* community are similar in how they define plagiarism, they differ in one key area: while the practice of directly copying the words of someone else was categorized as plagiarism, the concept of stealing another author's ideas and using them was a readily accepted practice. A 2014 essay on the website Reddit, written by user hurricangst, explains the dynamics of the *Twilight* fanfiction community and the reaction to the fanfiction "Masters of the Universe", cited as the source material for *Fifty Shades of Grey* and the center of the original controversy surrounding E.L. James. While it paints a less-than-flattering picture of E.L. James' involvement within the fandom, it also makes explicitly clear that the negative reactions to "Masters of the Universe" only began to spring up when E.L. James pulled the fic in order to publish it. Until it was retooled into *Fifty Shades*, the original fanfiction was one in a long line of derivative works popular at the time. As explained in hurricangst's essay "Fifty Shades of Grey: The Reddit Origins Essay", *Masters of the Universe* was based upon fanfiction and trends already prevalent within the fandom.

Fifty Shades was part of this. A lot of people here are saying it's ripping off [another *Twilight* fanfiction], but it's not. It's ripping off another really popular *Twilight* AH-AU called "The Submissive", written by TaraSueMe... Whenever a fic reached mega-popularity, there always began a brief spike of fics using those tropes. For instance, there was once a really popular fic about Edward being a tattoo artist... which spawned all kinds of fics about Edward and Bella having tattoos. There were even contests with prizes to see who wrote the best tattoo fic... Just about everything in her books is derivative... and not derivative of other media,

and not even just derivative of *Twilight*, but directly derivative of other *Twilight* fanfics (“50 Shades of Grey: A Reddit Origins Essay.”).

The understanding that “Masters of the Universe” was a derivative piece of fiction that evolved from a community with a different attitude towards the concept of plagiarizing ideas means that the *Twilight* fanfiction community does not consider similar ideas or cases of parallel thought a form of plagiarism; this attitude is further echoed by a thread on the *Twilight* message board when the topic comes up, with one user suggesting that it is impossible to come up with an original plot or idea when the amount of fanfiction for *Twilight* is so large, and that no matter what an author chooses to write about, someone will undoubtedly say, “ ‘hey that’s been done before’ (booksgalore, “Re: Imitating vs. Copying stories”). This attitude is echoed in hurricangst’s essay on *Fifty Shades of Grey* and its origins.

These instances are exceedingly important to document, as they represent what plagiarism really means to both of these communities, and uncovers the social dynamics that influence these decisions. These incidents are exceptions to the rules of the group, not the norm, but are useful in determining where each community’s ideology differs in what constitutes plagiarism (in this case, the idea of whether or not it is possible to plagiarize ideas) no matter how slight the difference really is, and how the structures in place affect what is and is not considered plagiarism. Above all, these incidents suggest a correlation between the influences certain members of the community have on the others, and how positions of power can effectively shift the rules of a community to suit their own needs.

## Discussion

For the overwhelming majority of the cases of plagiarism reported there was a noticeable pattern in how the cases played out: one member of the community noted that plagiarism had occurred and informed other members and moderators of the offense. The offense was noted and dealt with in a manner appropriate to the site: stories were removed, the plagiarists were blacklisted and occasionally had their account frozen, and generally following moderator action, a chorus of community members appeared to comment on the debacle as a whole, proclaiming plagiarism one of the worst offenses a person in their community can commit.

This in itself is where the act of plagiarizing in academia and plagiarizing within these fanfiction communities differs: when someone plagiarizes within a fanfiction community, it is a public event. In academia, the public is not privy to the proceedings between the accused and those whom are allowed to pass judgment and punishment for their actions. Within the fanfiction communities, the accusations are public. Any involved party is allowed to join in on commenting about every aspect of the plagiarism accusation. TAPIR's discussion thread, as well as the sister blog where all the accusations are documented, are open to the public. The message boards visited do not require anything other than an account in order to voice an opinion. Because popularity is the currency of these fandoms, the accusations have become public because plagiarizing within these fandoms threatens to shift popularity to someone undeserving of it.

The deviations to this basic script appear when popularity and attention intersects with the writing process, and when suddenly the person under the microscope for one of the community's biggest taboos has clout, like published authors Cassandra Clare and

E.L. James. To put things another way, the accusations against Cassandra Clare are accusations of copyright infringement, or something similar to legal and academic definitions of plagiarism. She was found to be taking words from sources such as popular television shows like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *The X-Files*, various movies from the filmography of director Woody Allen, and, of most importance to author Avocado, *The Secret Country* Trilogy, a series of novels by author Pamela Dean (“The Cassandra Clare Debacle”). Meanwhile, author E.L. James was able to avoid attracting attention based upon the differing definitions of plagiarism in both communities. E.L. James’ work is based upon an entire community that does not take stock in the notion that an entire idea can be copyrighted, but did balk at the idea of earning money off of ideas that were the end result of an entire fandom’s collaboration—especially because shortly after her success, she cut herself out of the fandom entirely: “Erika never looked back. She actually has blocked every single person I still know from fandom on her twitter account. She used the community to get her book (most ideas created by the community itself) to #1 then essentially shut the door on them all” (“Fifty Shades of Grey: The Reddit Origins Essay.”). What E.L. James did with *Masters of the Universe* is more closely aligned with the idea of stealing intellectual property, although the circumstances are unusual.

At the end of the day, one of the most fulfilling parts of writing fanfiction is the instant gratification and feedback an author can receive for their work. The Internet allows stories to be shared almost instantaneously, and all of the largest fanfiction archives have counters on the pages of the fanfiction to show how many people have clicked through to read the story, as well as features that allow stories to be shared, commented upon, and saved for later. It only takes one share to potentially start a chain

reaction that allows a story to reach an entire community and, in some instances, gain a large following within the community.

Although encouraging, fanfiction authors are still, at the end of the day, competing for the same views, the same comments, and the same chance at popularity. In the same vein, popularity and credibility is exactly what is at stake when plagiarism is involved: someone else is taking the merits that come with publishing a piece of fanfiction in these communities and taking credit for the hard work of someone else. Although the punishment is severe, in the eyes of some plagiarists, it is entirely possible that the risk of getting caught is worth the attention they get in return.

Popularity as a form of social currency within these communities works for those whom discover plagiarism within their ranks as well. Some gain popularity through policing plagiarism instead of writing fanfiction. It is entirely possible to get into the good graces of moderators or other authors through protecting them against those that wish to feed off their popularity or whom threaten the social norms of the community. TAPIR is only as effective as the team dedicated to researching each accusation and compiling case reports against those that plagiarize, and the results speak for themselves as they cover not only fanfiction, but accusations of plagiarism in art, videos, poetry, and translations with no case left unopened. The TAPIR members are ensuring that each accusation of plagiarism is looked into, but also reinforcing the community's definitions of plagiarism and cementing it as one of the most heinous crimes a community member could commit—and that is not even considering the amount of work done to investigate plagiarism accounts on every message board, fan site, or archive dedicated specifically for the two series under scrutiny.

The only time these norms are ever challenged is when popularity crosses a certain threshold wherein a story reaches a substantial readership and fans of this story evolve into fans of the author themselves. Both Cassandra Clare's *Draco* trilogy and E.L. James' *Master of the Universe* were met with overwhelmingly positive reception, despite Clare's tendency to include quotations from other sources and ultimately lift entire paragraphs from other fantasy novels and despite E.L. James' entire work being derivative of other *Twilight* fanfiction authors and their work in everything from concept to execution. Both works had their detractors during the time of their publication, but as the accounts point out this did not stop them from becoming popular with the overwhelming majority, despite the content not being truly unique. An oversight to this degree in the very morals that the community as a whole pushes has only one answer: there came a point during the heyday of the *Draco* Trilogy and *Master of the Universe* where being a fan and defending the works of Cassandra Clare and E.L. James would put a fan in a better position than speaking out against the injustices, speaking to the hypocritical nature of the way these communities address plagiarism.

Writing a piece of fanfiction can attract some reward, no matter how small—for those who cannot or choose not to write, it only seems natural to try and search for a way to attain that popularity through other means, whether it be underhanded or not. When the only real punishment is one account being banned from a website and a story being deleted (and no recorded attempt to ban a user's IP address, thereby disallowing them from ever registering another account) the risks involved in plagiarizing fanfiction seem relatively minor, compared to the potential boons an author receives from publishing their fanfiction. Although the court of popular opinion is a powerful beast in theory, in

practice, it is not surprising to see that so many plagiarists are repeat offenders and have multiple attempts at story theft on their personal record. It is almost too easy to simply make a new account and start again from square one.

In the practices of regulating plagiarism, there comes a point where even the most set in stone rules and beliefs of a community can fail. As popular stories are a means of which to measure success and status within fanfiction circles, people inevitably flock to those whom have the most views or reviews, if only to bask in the popularity of the authors themselves, in hopes of gaining status or recognition through association or through being part of a sub-group within the main fandom. Despite the accusations, when the *Draco* trilogy was removed from Fanfiction.net, the overwhelming majority of onlookers were in favor of Cassandra Clare. Despite E.L. James' work being wholly derivative of others, hurricangst notes that people did not do anything in the face of *Master of the Universe* because "some people hadn't seen the original, or other people liked the content more than they disliked reposts ("50 Shades of Grey: The Reddit Origins Essay.")". In both of these instances, being a fan of Cassandra Clare and E.L. James was not something that went against the grain of the rest of the community—quite the contrary, in fact. It became much easier and more favorable to an individual fan to stand for both of the authors, because the loss of popularity for daring to take a stand against either of them would bring the ire of the community upon the naysayer's back in a way that is reminiscent of how the community treats plagiarists that do not reach the status that either Cassandra Clare or E.L. James achieved.

When all is said and done, popularity is the reward for writing fanfiction in these communities, and it makes sense that the system for policing plagiarism would change to

accommodate popular authors. If their systems of regulating plagiarists worked perfectly, the “Draco” trilogy would have lost favor with the majority of its audience and the highly derivative nature of *Twilight* fanfiction may not even exist. One popular author was denounced as a plagiarist by a small fraction of the community and became pariahs because of their proof. E.L. James was allowed to continue writing and *Master of the Universe* was ultimately pulled only because it was being published, and only when it was published did fans even begin to have a problem with her work. The *Harry Potter* and *Twilight* communities allowed two of their most prolific authors to figuratively get away with murder without reprimanding them at all. The need for popularity and status within these fanfiction communities overrode their own law in a way that is uncomfortably close to patterns seen in real life, as popularity can pardon the worst offenses in the public eye. It is almost understandable as to why Cassandra Clare and E.L. James acted as they did after the fact: like fanfiction communities, they valued popularity above all else, even honesty.



## Conclusion

On February 10<sup>th</sup>, 2016, Entertainment Weekly's website posted an article detailing the news that an author by the name of Sherrilyn Kenyon filed a lawsuit against Cassandra Clare and her original young adult novels. According to the article, Kenyon states that Clare lifted parts of Kenyon's *Dark Hunter* series for use in her *Shadowhunters* series. Both of these young adult series follow similar plotlines and use similar terminology, to the point where publishers could not distinguish between the two of them and accidentally printed 100,000 copies of Clare's *Shadowhunter* books with a symbol from the *Dark Hunter* novel series displayed on the cover (Biedenharn, "Cassandra Clare Sued for Copyright Infringement over *Shadowhunters* Series.").

Although this incident has yet to be resolved, this recent accusation strikes far too close to similar accusations Clare faced so many years ago; she is repeating the same pattern of usage she got away with so many years ago, but now, the stakes are even higher, with her reputation as a professional on the line for this infraction. However, it is not entirely Clare's fault that she's repeated the same behaviors that gave her status in the Harry Potter community if the community as a whole let her get away with what they considered to be the most heinous crime a fan could commit. Much like fanfiction itself can often ride the thin line between copyright infringement and parody in the eyes of academics, authors, and even other fans, plagiarism is a concept that is not so easily defined within these fan communities, and is not totally infallible when the biggest names in these fandoms can essentially break the community's own rules without being reprimanded or cast out.

The Internet has given rise to entire networks of fans from all walks of life, and many aspiring authors have found themselves a niche using characters they love in order to tell the stories blooming in their head. But with the ease of access comes an archive of everyone's conduct within an online community; a virtual paper trail is not that hard to follow and one infraction from years ago can potentially inform an employer of misconduct in the future. Plagiarism within these fanfiction communities is not as black and white as the reports make it out to be. At the end of the day, Cassandra Clare's plagiarism started with simply quoting other sources as a nod to fans that got the joke. E.L. James' career was built with the hard work of others, and if plagiarism was so easily defined, the derivative nature of *Twilight* fanfiction should not have been able to grow to the lengths it did.

The blame for these extenuating circumstances is not so easily placed, but I firmly believe it is important to take notes of the trends that may be on the rise—more and more frequently, successful authors are coming from humble fanfiction beginnings, and never before has it been this easy to self-publish original content and have it go viral. In the future, it would be fascinating to see what trends emerge, and whether or not E.L. James will find herself at the center of a controversy not too far off from Cassandra Clare. Perhaps, as a whole, the way people think about plagiarism needs to change, in order to better understand the ease of which it is able to be performed, and the reasons why it occurs in order to encourage different, better ways of gauging success in both the fanfiction community and wherever plagiarism continues to plague society. From these humble beginnings, new stories are being given to hungry audiences, and although plagiarism continues to be hotly contested, the complications that come where popularity,

plagiarism, and the Internet converge are well worth the ability for a new generation of authors to be heard.

### Limitations

The hardest thing to account for in the research of this topic is the availability of sources and raw data. Although numerous sites dedicate themselves to the archiving of older Internet pages, there are some things that will undoubtedly be lost and must be accounted for. The largest discrepancy in my data involves the range of years I was able to cover and the amount of data I was able to properly find in the case of the *Twilight* fanfiction community.

Although Harry Potter fanfiction has been around for nearly two decades—and, in fact, the majority of the biggest debacles within the community happened in the years following the turn of the century—it is still difficult to dig up past accusations of plagiarism outside of the incidents surrounding Cassandra Clare. Numerous sites are now closed, or were locked or otherwise made private in some form, requiring the approval of moderators to enter—moderators that have long since moved on from this community and with whom I was able to get in contact with. As such, the majority of my data in the *Harry Potter* community comes from times after 2006, when “The Cassandra Clare Debacle” was published online. Therefore, I only have secondhand accounts off the record in regards to plagiarism before that time.

The *Twilight* community’s data has a similar problem, although the lack of access actively hindered my ability to properly look for artifacts to examine. Although it is a much younger series and therefore had more fan sites readily available for me to peruse, it also does not have the breadth of accusations the *Harry Potter* community had. While

the reports I was able to find through TAPIR and message boards were usually meticulous in detail, I was only able to find a fraction of the cases I could for *Harry Potter*. Part of this is due to simply not being around as long the *Harry Potter* series, but nonetheless it hinders the analysis of the cases by numbers.

Finally, although nearly every case is supported by a large amount of evidence to indicate plagiarism has taken place, there is always a possibility of the accusations being merely conjecture. I did not come across people casually coming to the defense of plagiarists, but a majority of the people accused of plagiarism never spoke a word in their own defense. While I have little reason to believe the cases in which copious amounts of evidence is presented are completely fabricated, there lies a certain amount of doubt lingering when only one side of the story is presented.

Although my methods do have their limitations, I find that this method of categorizing the variations within these plagiarism accounts, as well as the methods I employed to find these articles, was thorough and representative of how the communities report and react to plagiarism. The categories were chosen based on the data itself, and not according to what I believed I would find, which falls in line with grounded theory and approaching my research with questions without looking for one specific answer. The work that I did to preserve these articles of the Internet also allowed for my research to be unrestricted by access to the Internet or server failure; I had backup screenshots and documents of every single piece of evidence within my cases, as well as saved the web address of every page referenced. Although hampered by the availability of data in some areas, I find my research to be solid.

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